

Liberal/Tory Pacts: Partnership of Principle or Struggle for Survival?

Malcolm Baines reports on the Liberal Democrat History Group discussion meeting in March 1997; with Michael Kandiah.

Despite all the interest over the last few years in Liberal/Labour relations, still topical following the invitation to Paddy Ashdown and other senior Liberal Democrats to join a Cabinet sub-committee in July, it is salutary to remember that Liberals have generally been much closer to forming alliances with the Conservatives than they have with their Labour rivals.

Dr Michael Kandiah, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary British History, focused in some detail on Liberal/Conservative negotiations during the 1945–51 Parliaments at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting just before the last general election. The chair of the meeting was Peter Thurnham MP, himself a recent defector from the Tories to the Liberal Democrats and MP for Bolton, scene of one of the two constituency level pacts between the two parties in the 1950s.

Dr Kandiah began by explaining that his own background was as a historian of the Conservative Party and in particular of the Conservative elite. He would look at the Tory strategy during the 1945–51 period in order to resolve why nothing more concrete happened with the Liberals despite the pressure to maximise the anti-socialist vote. This pressure commenced with the beginning of the Cold War and the first wave of nationalisations leading to the pamphlet 'Design for Freedom', produced by individuals working together in both parties. Labour proposals to reform the House of Lords also drew the parties closer as many Liberal peers were anxious to preserve one of the party's few remaining areas of influence.

Less helpful, however, were the steps taken by the Conservative party machine in May 1947 to formalise relations with the Liberal National Party, the successors to Sir John Simon's breakaway group in 1931. The Woolton/Teviot pact between the Liberal Nationals and the Tories was seen by the Liberals as confusing voters, and Churchill himself was deeply antipathetic to the Liberal Nationals because of their prewar support for appeasement. Woolton himself, originally from a business rather than a party background, saw the Conservatives as beyond politics and had little personal interest in promoting deals other than with specific individuals and constituencies. As a result, although the seeds for an agreement between Liberals and Conservatives were there, the 1950 election only saw scattered local cooperation, most notably in Huddersfield, where Donald Wade was elected as a Liberal MP.

The 1950 election was significant because while it brought major Conservative electoral progress, it led Central Office to conclude that they could not win without Liberal support. Churchill then proceeded to take unilateral action. He set up a committee under Rab Butler which began negotiations on policy with the Liberals. The committee, however, began with the premise that a strategic arrangement would not be accepted by the public. Violet Bonham-Carter, however, was only interested in the strategic benefits an arrangement would bring: seats, a role in government and electoral reform. Woolton thought the Liberals would wither away if the Conservatives did not throw them a lifeline, whilst most local associations had nothing but contempt for them. Proportional representation was therefore an insuperable problem and the negotiations made little progress. Unhappy with this, Churchill attempted to pressure the Conservatives into making concessions but local constituency resistance proved too strong.

As a result, the 1951 election was fought by the Conservatives on the basis that whilst they were in broad agreement with liberalism they would ignore the Liberal Party itself. The only local pact was in Bolton, leading to the election of Arthur Holt as the Liberal MP for Bolton West. When that election won the Conservatives a small overall majority the concerns about needing a close relationship with the Liberals to beat Labour fell away, although negotiations continued in a desultory fashion until the mid 1960s when Grimond repositioned the party on the left of the political spectrum.

Dr Kandiah's conclusion was that throughout the 1950s the two parties broadly agreed on policy, with the exception of proportional representation. The Conservatives did win the Liberal vote, and as a result the 1951 election, almost by default, but the Liberals were able to benefit and probably ensure their own survival as a result of the few deals that were agreed at constituency level.

The discussion that followed broadened out into the negotiations with Labour that some Liberal MPs were carrying out at the same time, how genuine Winston Churchill was about a formal Liberal/Tory pact, relations in Wales and the influence of the National Liberals through their magazine 'New Horizon' on the ideological development of the Tory party. All in all, an interesting review of an important period in the party's history.